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## Water scam turned off

### Scheme misled Spanish-speaking Md. residents to buy unneeded products

by Amber Parcher | Staff Writer

The Office of Consumer Protection reached a settlement last month with Virginia resident Rafael Arturo Cabello, over a door-to-door sales scam that targeted Spanish-speaking residents in Wheaton, Gaithersburg and Damascus last year.

The county alleges Cabello and his salespeople, who presented themselves as county government representatives, would "test" residents' water, usually right after a water main break, declare it unsafe to drink and tell residents they needed to purchase a water purification system for \$5,000 to \$7,000 to remedy the problem.

Cabello paid the OCP \$100 and has agreed to stop selling his water treatment systems in Montgomery County, according to Eric Friedman, OCP director. Cabello said he never represented himself as someone from the county government, and when he found out two of his salespeople were calling themselves government employees, he fired them. "I think it was more of a confusion," Cabello said in Spanish.

The water treatment systems Cabello sold were manufactured by California-based Puretech Water Treatment Systems Inc., a company Cabello worked for in 2006, Friedman and Cabello said. Cabello said Puretech gave him the equipment, financed the sale and gave him the paperwork to finish sales.

After an investigation, Puretech was ordered to pay \$1,000 to the OCP, Friedman said.

A representative from Puretech told The Gazette the company had nothing to do with the sales.

Jeff Khani, an officer at Puretech, said Cabello does not work for Puretech but had somehow acquired Puretech equipment.

"If he's claiming he's doing business with us, he's 100 percent wrong," he said.

The water treatment systems have since been removed from the residents' homes, Friedman said, and residents who paid for the systems got their money back.

"[The door-to-door salespeople] alleged some pretty egregious things," Friedman said, noting the salespeople engaged in scare tactics to get people to buy the systems. "They were going into neighborhoods shortly after there was a water main break, so water was on the mind of these consumers."

Aldo Aguilar, a Damascus resident, said that is exactly why he let Cabello and his salespeople into his home. Aguilar said he remembered hearing about a water main break in Silver Spring a few days before a salesperson came to his door. It made sense that the county would want to check his water, he said.

Aguilar said several salespeople came to his house throughout the course of the sale. And, he said, they weren't very straightforward with him about who they were.

In one case, someone told Aguilar he was a county employee checking the water and explaining the

health risks of contaminated water. Then a person representing himself as a Puretech employee offered to install a water purification system. Finally, someone told Aguilar he needed to pay \$7,000 for the system.

Representatives from the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission said residents should never have to worry about their water quality, even after a water main break. The WSSC tests the water in its distribution system thousands of times each year, said Jim Neustadt, communications and community relations director for WSSC.

"If there's ever a problem with the drinking water, we should let everybody know about it," he said.

Neustadt said representatives from the WSSC will always have an official photo-identification badge and will never try to sell residents anything.

Officials say there are three precautions residents can

take to avoid consumer fraud:

-The first, said Eric Friedman, director of the county's Office of Consumer Protection, is to research the company you're buying a product from. Residents can visit <http://dceasternpa.bbb.org/contactDC.asp> to look up recorded complaints or contact the OCP at 240-777-3636 to inquire.

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-The second is to ask for official identification of anyone who comes to your door selling a product, Friedman said.

-And third, always check with your local provider to confirm any alleged problems with any utility, Friedman said. For water, residents can contact the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission at 301-206-9772.